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SUBJECT: THE AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH PRIVY COUNCILOR
GENERAL SURAYUD, FEBRUARY 16, 2005

REF: BANGKOK 8629

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, Reason 1.4 (d)

US INVOLVEMENT IN SOUTHERN UNREST

1. (S) On February 16, 2005 I, met with Privy Councilor General Surayud Chulanont former Supreme Commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTAF) and Royal Thai Army (RTA) Commander-in-Chief. The meeting, held at Surayud's request, took place at his residence in the Eastern suburbs of Bangkok and lasted about two hours. Surayud, a soft-speaking and quiet personality, had just returned from a trip to Yala province, where he met with a local Imam (unnamed) who told him that rumors were circulating about CIA involvement in the surge of violence that has plagued the deep South for over a year. I denied any such U.S. involvement, to which Surayud replied, &well, that's the rumor.8 Surayud said the Imam claimed that former Ambassador Johnson had been to the South three times and &offered to help8 in any way possible, a proposal to which the Imam demurred. I told Surayud that I had no current plans to go to the deep South. Surayud said that, in his view, it was not a good idea for me to travel there, and mentioned a recent "troublesome" trip by an Embassy "political officer.8 (Note: Ambassador Johnson never traveled to the far southern provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, although he did visit Phuket and Nakhon Si Thammarat. The embassy officer Surayud referred to is probably our RSO who, during an initial security survey of the South in December 2004, was "ambushed" by local journalists. Per reftel, their news stories distorted the purposes of his trip and fed the kind of conspiratorial thinking reflected by the Imam's comments to General Surayud. Various Embassy officers travel frequently to Thailand's deep South. End Note.)

2. (S) Surayud stated his support for Thailand's role in sending troops to Afghanistan and Iraq but noted that a redeployment in either country now would be ill-advised and could be used by rabble rousers in the South to portray the RTG as eager to get involved in anti-Muslim activity, prodded by the U.S.

THAKSIN,S SOUTHERN SECURITY STRATEGY

3. (S) Surayud commented on the volatile situation in the deep South. He said that when General Prem Tinsulanonda (now President of the Privy Council) was prime minister, he had established a security structure in the South, the Southern Border Peacekeeping Center, which was continued into the second administration of Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai. That Center was organized as a combined civilian, police and military command structure to pool intelligence, but also to serve as a legitimate means for citizens to send in complaints. PM Thaksin dismantled the Center in 2002. Thaksin's explanation to Surayud at the time was that there were &only 35 rebels hiding in the woods with guns" and the Royal Thai Police (RTP) alone could handle the situation. In fact, Surayud suspected, Thaksin had dismantled the Center, thereby effectively shelving Thai military involvement, because of his own police background and sympathies towards the RTP, and as part of a plan to win the South back from the opposition Democrat Party (DP). Surayud summarized the problems in the South as complex, and therefore needing a complex solution. He said the government must learn more about the local culture, needs to invest in education, and should not resort to new southern command structures that rely on the Ministry of Defense for authority and accountability.

4. (S) Surayud noted his amazement that Agriculture Minister Wan Muhamad Noor Matha's Wadah faction candidates were defeated in the recent general election, given Wan Noor,s central prominence for years in the South, with a variety of political parties.

5. (S) Commenting on HM Queen Sirikit,s speech in November 2004 where she spoke about the plight of Buddhist villagers in the South, Surayud said that he had suggested to the Queen before the speech not to go into too much detail about the South. I told Surayud that the Queen's remarks seemed to reflect general views of most Thai people about Thai Muslims in the South. Surayud agreed, adding that her comments had

not been helpful. Furthermore, Surayud surmised that the King's silence on matters in the South in his December 5 birthday speech was one result of the Queen's remarks. The King had different views on the South than did the Queen, but was not about to make that publicly evident. Surayud agreed with me that most moderates in the south just want to be left alone, but are caught between an onslaught of globalization and a sense of increasingly imposed 'Thainess' from Central Thailand and a swan song of radical Islamist efforts locally.

BURMA POLICY TOO SOFT

16. (S) I asked Surayud about the current RTG policy of "constructive engagement" with Burma. Surayud's assessment was that it was 'too soft', because the SPDC never listens. He said that the government should return to the policy of the second Chuan administration, which had used a harsher rhetoric and kept closer to Thailand's national interests. Surayud stated that as RTA Commander-in-Chief he had emphasized the importance of education and going after the Wa if the SPDC didn't. He recounted that Thaksin had initially agreed with this approach and Surayud had moved forces to the North of Thailand (disguising them as maneuvers from the Northeast). While he was in Washington giving a speech on Capitol Hill, Surayud said he had learned that Thaksin was expressing strong opposition to the troop movements, even though they had already discussed them in apparent agreement. Surayud speculated that about that time the Shin satellite deal with Burma was being fixed and had trumped his moves against the Wa. After that, Thaksin had tried to sideline him, if not remove him altogether. 'I was too independent', Surayud summarized. (Note: Surayud was promoted to Supreme Commander in 2002 -- a move regarded in Thailand as being kicked upstairs, away from real authority -- and retired in September 2003. End Note.) Surayud also commented that the Thaksin Administration's highly publicized and controversial "war on drugs" -- which began in early 2003 -- has not been successful, even if it appears to be popular. Methamphetamines are still widely available in Thailand. Thaksin, he said, only eliminated the 'small fry' along the border and didn't go after the Wa, the producers. (Surayud also said he thought many innocent people had been killed in the drug suppression efforts in southern Thailand.)

FINAL NOTE ON THE CROWN PRINCE

17. (S) I asked Surayud about the heir to King Bhumibol, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn. Surayud replied that he had tutored the Crown Prince some 20 years ago and surmised that 'He'll never measure up to the present monarch, but "somehow the Thai people will make do."'

BOYCE